

HENRY AND CONSTANCE

By HENRY BENRATH

Scarcely anywhere else in the world is history as vital and as active a force today as in Germany. This explains the large number of German historical novels of the last few years. One might reply that modern American literature has also produced a great many historical novels. But while these latter are mainly written for entertainment or for the purpose of awakening patriotic feelings, in the case of German novels there is an unmistakable desire above all to learn from history. Hence those periods or problems of European history are given most attention that have a special bearing on the present. The early Middle Ages, in which a European empire existed for centuries as an idea and at times even as a reality, have, more than any other period, become the subject of novels and studies. And, in view of the present-day effort to create a united Europe, the question has often been raised as to the reasons for the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire.

The German author Henry Benrath has recently made a serious exploration of this problem in conjunction with a biography of the Empress Constance and has given an answer to it which is to be found in the following pages. His book was an immediate success and tens of thousands of copies were sold. It was very favorably reviewed by the German press, especially the "Voelkischer Beobachter," the central organ of the National-Socialist Party.

The three main figures of the novel are Emperor Henry VI, the successor to his father Frederick Barbarossa, who reigned at the end of the twelfth century and wanted by force and centralism to realize his dream of a European empire; Constance, his wife, who, as heiress to the Viking kingdom of Sicily, also, it is true, nursed the dream of this empire, but wanted to see the individual life of Sicily (and other non-German territories) preserved in the realization of this dream; and lastly the much-traveled young German knight Lothar von Ingelheim who represents the voice of the author and that of many thinking Germans of today.

We have translated two scenes from the novel which clearly present the heart of the problem. Benrath wrote the book after twenty-five years of historical study. But whether, 750 years ago, people really spoke as they do in these two scenes is of minor importance beside the fact that they speak as they do in a German bestseller of today.—K.M.

At the court supper table Lothar von Ingelheim sat on the left of the Emperor.

The Emperor, inclined to be malicious and long a despiser of men, was conscious of the discomfort caused among the court sycophants by the unexpected presence of Lothar. He heartily enjoyed augmenting it by an exaggerated show of graciousness. When the musicians and tumblers arrived after supper, he put his arm around Lothar's shoulder and said, while rising:

"Come, my friend, let's go to work and not begrudge our long-suffering gentlemen their well-earned relaxation."

While the brilliant company remained deeply bowed, the Emperor and Lothar left the stuffy hall.

There was no one present at the long conversation which now began in the Emperor's study.

When they had both sat down at the brass Arabian table where a strong linden tisane had been prepared for them, the Emperor said:

"Speak as if you were speaking to one of your fellow students in Paris or Palermo. Speak quite freely and in absolute confidence to a man of your own age. We are both—thank God—still young men. What you tell me is for my ears alone. It will not be recorded by any government scribe and it will not be entered into the archives of the Empire. It will never have existed for anyone except for us two."

"I hope that I may be of use to Your Majesty. In everything I do, I am guided solely by the thought of the Empire. When I left Germany in 1187, I went without prejudice of any kind, not even political. I simply wanted to see with my own eyes and hear with my own ears. My experiences have been manifold and significant. They have given me insight, but little pleasure. Above all they have taught me that the presumptuous conception of happiness of most people forms a curious contrast to the miserable conditions existing for its fulfillment. It really seems that one must demand a hundred to get ten. Since I have realized this painful truth, the necessities of imperial policy have become clear to me. As long as there is a papal power laying claim to world-wide recognition, there must be an imperial power with the same claim. The world exists and develops on the eternal tension between spirit and matter. Once the idea of an empire to unite the world is on the way to realization, it obviously cannot stop at any given point. It can only—and must—stop where outward possessions absorb it instead of nourishing it; where the people, inhabiting and considering as their own this country or that, no longer have the feeling that an alliance with the sovereignty of the empire serves really to enrich them or even to afford them valuable protection. In this way the whole question of imperial power, resting on the emperor, seems to me to converge into the one question, how the actual ties between the parts of the empire and the whole are to be accomplished and maintained. This is where the art of ruling begins.

To rule is to make use of the correct means for every case."

"The correct means," the Emperor repeated. "There you have my sleepless nights and my tortured conscience. The words are easily spoken—and so difficult to fulfill! For these so-called correct means are not determined, as the superficial observer may think, only by the needs of those at whom they are aimed, but also by the extent of the purpose of him who makes use of them. I assume, von Ingelheim, that you too have had ample opportunity to realize how staggeringly incapable the average man is of grasping the flight of truly lofty thoughts. I assume that you too have experienced the rage that takes hold of our entire being when again and again we beat our wings in vain against ill will or wicked stupidity."

"It is just because I have experienced these things, Your Majesty, that, in carrying out my plans, I have always desisted from using means which would have cost me unnecessary energy and would, in fact, have brought me no nearer to my goal. I believe—as I am sure Your Majesty does too—that intelligence is a far greater power than force."

The Emperor knit his brows and stared at the floor. Then, somewhat brusquely, he rapped out:

"I see what you are heading for..."

"Straight for Sicily, Your Majesty," Lothar replied with that sureness which always carried him over the most dangerous spots.

Dumfounded by the bluntness of the answer and at the same time delighted by its fearless arrogance, the Emperor said:

"If you are in such a hurry, why didn't you start at once *in medias res*?"

"Because I felt it was important to make clear to Your Majesty that my opinion of the Sicilian question is based on viewpoints of a higher order. 'Empire' is an eternal idea. Just as eternal is the idea of 'church.' The

possible effects and effectiveness of the 'empire' as a whole, which, of course, must be graded according to the individual nature of its parts, must not exist on a plane ethically lower than that of the 'church.' Rather on a higher one. Then, beside their validity they also have their fighting value."

"My dear Ingelheim! The school of Paris seems to have borne good fruit in you!"

"Not the school of Paris, Your Majesty. Just the school of common sense."

"And you think that I can make those Sicilian rebels tractable by means of this common sense? Why, in that case they would have to have some themselves, or at least acknowledge it!"

"I don't think, Your Majesty, that it is a question of making them tractable..."

"What else then?"

"Much more: actual appeasement."

"Even the kings of Sicily themselves have not succeeded in that."

"I don't see why that should prevent Your Majesty succeeding in it. I believe that an entirely unexpected imperial clemency will have ten times the effect of the same clemency on the part of a king of their own dynasty."

The Emperor looked long at Lothar von Ingelheim. Then his eyes wandered from him into the great distances of thought.

"I would like to hear something else from you now," he said after a long pause. "You said before: the question of imperial power is the question, how the actual ties between the parts of the empire and the whole are to be accomplished and maintained. You know, of course, that in the different countries of the Empire very different administrative measures are applied. In the republican cities of Lombardy, for instance, they are quite different from those in feudal Tuscany. So your expression 'actual' ties does not allude to these problems."

"Of course not, Your Majesty. To my mind, administrative measures do not represent political ties. All political ties—and it is only of these that we are speaking—have a spiritual basis. A poorly administrated province can be a hundred times more loyal toward the empire than one that is ideally administrated, if the empire does not violate its soul."

"What do you mean by the 'soul'?"

Lothar took a sip from the cup beside him, thought for a moment, and said:

"Even if it cannot be denied that in all the states of the Occident the same classes have the actual power—the princes, the aristocracy, the knights, and the clergy—and that the contacts of these classes across the various frontiers are doubtless very lively, the fact remains that within the frontiers a national feeling of solidarity is beginning to develop which no politician may overlook now who does not want to be faced by dangerous failures. The spiritual peculiarity of the European states expresses itself in this particular consciousness much more than in the cosmopolitan feeling of the ruling classes. But even these can scarcely evade this mounting wave. They adjust themselves to it, without knowing how. I do not think that any power in the world can again destroy this feeling of solidarity. To take it into consideration means winning over its supporters. To disregard it means creating deadly enemies. In hardly any state has it crystallized as clearly as in Sicily. If Your Majesty not only treats it with indulgence but actually encourages it, the basis for an imperial unity will be created, the power of which can scarcely be suspected today. It would be the attracting and balancing power of a confederation, of a co-ordination of all parts under a voluntarily recognized sovereignty on whom would devolve the maintenance of foreign relations. To have created such an 'empire' would place Your Majesty's name among the stars—and put the *Curia*

Romana once and for all where it belongs. I think it would be the only possible empire today for which one could predict a long and safe existence. For its separate parts would be mutually complementary, and would have nothing to gain but much to lose by a renewed falling apart. What I am saying, Your Majesty, is not fabrication. I base it upon what I could confirm in France, Burgundy, Romagna, Aragon, Navarre, Italy, and especially in Sicily. Possibly I am rushing ahead and the time is not yet ripe. But what should stop Your Majesty, with the help of the Empress, bringing them to maturity?"

"Well then, explain to me how you can believe in the phantom of a confederation?"

"A confederation is not a union of states in which the people have suddenly turned into angels, but a voluntary co-operation of greater or lesser political structures which see their advantage in fruitful agreement rather than in fruitless struggle. I believe, Your Majesty, that what the cities of Lombardy have achieved in the treaty of Piacenza can also be achieved by larger units, as long as they are properly led."

"I agree," replied the Emperor, "but only on one condition, which you overlook, namely that the constant disturbers of the peace first be crushed with an iron hand. For wherever a higher unit is to be formed, the profiteers of the smaller ones oppose it with all their might. There you have the root of the whole problem! A root which is as old and at the same time as new as the world since the creation of mankind. Believe me, as sure as I am the Emperor, I have no worse intentions towards Sicily than the Empress. But I know very well that I cannot exorcise the evil spirits there, which do not allow their own country to have any peace, by playing on a flute. Don't forget that for ten years I have devoted myself to very real politics, that sometimes I have sweated blood when faced by an overwhelming mass of hostile elements!

Men are good-for-nothings, my dear Ingelheim. To be a statesman in these days means to drive out the devil..."

"With Beelzebub?"

The eyes of the Emperor flashed:

"Quite right—even with Beelzebub, if there is no other way. And in nine cases out of ten there really is no other way."

"I hope," Ingelheim said softly, "that Sicily is the one exception."

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Two days before the opening of the meeting, the Emperor turned up in Sicily and visited the Empress in the castle of Favara, where she was spending the summer. She had been secretly informed by a trusty friend and had been able to make her preparations. She had already been guarding herself against surprises for some time. Henry's presence in Palermo in April and May had shown her that anything could be expected of him of which a highly strung if not already insane imperator was capable. She was prepared for the worst, and, because of that, quite calm. But she was also resolved to go to any lengths should the Emperor forget what he owed to the heiress of Sicily.

Just before nine o'clock one evening he appeared on the threshold of the loggia where she was sitting with Anne de Perche and her Arabian reader Adallah. The door through which he had entered remained open. Behind him in the dimness of the long corridor his bodyguard could be seen fully armed. The light of the hanging lamps reflected from the blue-gray steel mesh of the chain mail.

"I desire that you dismiss your lady-in-waiting and your reader," said the Emperor. "I have not come for a summer evening's chat."

He received no reply. But the narrow terrace leading out to the garden silently filled with giants of Saracen soldiers, likewise the space between the Empress and the double doors. And before the Emperor's bodyguard in the corridor had had time to find

out what was going on behind their backs, the stairways had also been occupied and shut off by Arab escorts.

Henry stamped his foot so heavily on the floor that the low silver table and the sherbet bowls on it clattered loudly.

Her fingers playing with a double row of pearls which fell over the thin silk of her white dress to her lap, Constance said:

"I understand your agitation. Dismiss your bodyguard. Mine will withdraw at the same instant. As long as our conversation lasts, no one shall leave the castle of Favara."

Henry made a vague gesture towards his guards who interpreted this as an order to withdraw. Within a minute both room and corridor were empty, the doors shut, Emperor and Empress alone.

Constance indicated a chair:

"It is very hot. A bowl of sherbet will do you good. Take the one from which I will drink before you, so that you can be sure of not being poisoned. Do take some, you look wretched. No wonder. All you burden yourself with is enough to tax the strength of an ox. And your own health has, as I have been told, again been seriously endangered for more than a month. Do you want a cushion in your back? Would you rather sit in my chair? It is more comfortable."

"A woman who behaves like you do in a situation such as yours," Henry said slowly, "is much more dangerous than I had been led to believe."

"I have always told you that you are a poor psychologist. And you know nothing whatever about women. Otherwise you would not say that a woman, who has supported your policy beyond the limits of endurance, is dangerous. All the dangers you have encountered were invoked by yourself. In your whole life there has only been one person dangerous to you: you yourself. But not a woman who has been maltreated and wounded unto death."

"Do you really mean to deny what the whole court knows?" the Emperor asked. "Do you deny that you yourself—and no one else—are the soul of the latest conspiracy against me?"

"It is you! No one but you! Have you really lost all sense of the relations of events, all sense of the effect of your deeds? Have you entirely forgotten where justice ends and injustice begins? Do you no longer have in you that eternal balance which indicates weights and counterweights?"

"No, I have no time now for such foolishness."

"You are bleeding to death through the wounds of your victims. It is the last blood that you can afford to lose. Look at yourself in the mirror."

"You are wrong—I live on this blood! It gives me the strength to endure. Guilty blood! Blood of the violators of my creation, of the task I have to carry out, of the Empire..."

"The Empire is nourished by the living spirit of the creator, not by the torment of those who have never believed in it. Selfish renegades may deserve punishment—those who doubt and despair need help. Is that the meaning of the Holy Roman Empire, that which you have done in Sicily? Blinding, flaying, drowning, burning, breaking on the wheel, impaling, dismembering? I know quite well that the instruments of rule in these lawless times are and often enough must be cruel. But yours are not those of rule but of revenge! He who avenges himself is without self-control—he forestalls God. And he who has lost his self-control is no longer a ruler. In setting foot again on Sicilian soil you have entered your prison from which no one now can free you or your memory. And you could have entered paradise if you had only paid a little heed to those voices which have been trying to reach your heart."

"In the paradise of these perjurers whom you call your compatriots?" the Emperor interjected hoarsely.

"Oh no—among every man's compatriots there are many perjurers, you

know that as well as I do. The paradise I mean opens its gates wherever free will is begotten. When you reduced my rank to that of Regent you drove yourself to where you stand today—and you forced upon me a discord which has made me barren. As a queen—not only in name—I would have been able to manage my country all right. And had I not been able to, there would always have been time to appeal to you for help. You did not let me exercise my influence—nor did you use your own influence. You have given orders and laid waste both country and souls. Where you stand today, there is nothing left! Here in Sicily you issue documents, give grants, make laws, just as if everything were as it should be—and you know in your heart, as well as I know in my heart, that with your 'Empire' you have created nothing but a skeleton that is not alive. Rule and compass have failed. The world is still rejoicing, all kinds of knights and flatterers still sing at you court: 'Never was there an emperor so glorious!' But you yourself—if only you knew of a single soul before whom you could do it, you would like to rid yourself of your torment and confess that you already hear the foundations cracking beneath your feet. The Empire lacks a binding and uniting soul. Will power, and be it as gigantic as yours, may subdue it for a while, but it does not bind."

"Not even on the rack could you have given me more valuable confessions. Let us leave pretty generalities and draw our conclusions: as you believe the foundations of the Empire have already begun to crack, it would only suit you, wouldn't it, if the conspiracy against me had succeeded?"

"Not at all. You prove to me, as you have so often done before, that you are not able to follow a thought logically to its end. But since you have given me the cue, I will tell you what would have 'suited' me. Just one thing—to exert such pressure on you through the holy rebellion of my violated country that at least for once

you would have remembered God and the limits set for even the greatest doer of deeds. You have treated God very badly. Three times He lifted the noose from your neck—when Pope Urban died, when you recovered from your illness in Monte Casino, and when the Austrian surrendered Richard *Cœur de Lion*. Of each of these events you said that it was a 'building-stone in your creation'! I have often shuddered when I heard you speak with such extravagance and immaturity of 'your' creation. It would have 'suited' me to feel that you were maturing, as beautifully and naturally as only the best Germans know how. But you just did not grow with your difficulties; they only made you old and wicked. So you were weaker than the material which life has given you to master, however much your outward success seems to indicate the contrary. I have sometimes hoped that the birth of your son would soften your nature and produce in you the blossoming which is the forerunner of maturity. I have hoped in vain. Like a cataleptic fit you have gone through these times, never feeling the breath of them. Most probably a part of posterity will admire your arbitrary acts. For posterity often enough feels the need of prostrating itself in front of all kinds of fetishes which, in their poverty, they drag from the rubbish of the centuries. You will probably go down in history as a mighty ruler. There will not be very many who will understand that above all you were lucky enough to be lucky. And still fewer who are capable of realizing that your will was so boundless because your character is so paltry. I have nothing more to say to you."

As the Emperor attempted to get up he was overcome by an attack of stomach cramps. He was carried onto the terrace, where he soon recovered. When he left the castle of Favara he was in excellent spirits. There was nothing that gave him such confidence in himself as a resistance that he believed to have broken. That was as far as he could see.